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ABSTRACT

While being videotaped, ten second graders and ten fifth graders retold the story of "Beauty and the Beast" which was read twice to them during the preceding week. Responses were evaluated for content and accuracy. Results showed that younger children more accurately recalled the story and more frequently mentioned its resolution. Older children recalled fewer events and had more difficulty with the story's sequence: they were less likely to mention the resolution but focused on the conflict. It is suggested that the older children's social/cognitive development, enabling them to consider relative truths and viewpoints, led them to concentrate on elements of choice and conflict rather than on sequential events and resolutions. (Author/MP)

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Comparison and Development of Story Recall by Second and Fifth Graders

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ABSTRACT

Second and fifth graders retold the story of Beauty and the Beast which they'd heard the preceding week. Responses were evaluated for content and accuracy. Results showed that younger children more accurately recalled the story and more frequently mentioned the conclusion. Older children recalled fewer events and had more difficulty with the story's sequence. They were less likely to mention the conclusion but focused on the conflict. Social/cognitive development of fifth graders suggests that ability to understand relative truths and viewpoints leads to concentrating on points of choice rather than on conclusions.

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Comparison and Development of Story Recall by Second and Fifth Grade Children

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In our study second and fifth grade children were asked to recall a fairy tale they had heard read twice in the week prior to taped interviews. On the whole, second graders did a quite remarkable job of recalling the story. Contrary to our expectations, fifth graders had a more difficult time in recalling and organizing the story. Our presentation today will focus on some of these differences and try to make sense of them, particularly since they violate many of the assumptions about the development of cognitive organizations in childhood.

We will begin to presenting some of the traditions within which research into children's literature has been conducted, describe the methods and analysis for our study, then go on to present and discuss our findings. Some detail has necessarily been omitted in keeping within the time constraints of an oral presentation but the "essentials" of the study are here.

Research in children's literature has frequently taken one of two different approaches. One body of research has been concerned with an examination of what the child brings to the reading experience in terms of cognitive organizations, or schemas, and the manner in which these organizations interact with the logical structural organizations of the stories themselves. Some of Nancy Stein's work (1978) has taken this approach. This theoretical framework has led to investigations into the role of episodic structure and story length in story recall (Glenn, 1978); the influence of the reader's perspective on what is recalled (Pitchert and Anderson, 1976); and research related to an understanding of the skills necessary for reading comprehension (Baker and Stein, 1978).

A second body of research (e.g., Bettelheim, 1977; Yolen, 1978) has focused primarily on a discussion of the child's need for stories and how these stories can help children grow in all areas of experience. Bruno Bettelheim, in particular, has dealt quite extensively with the notion that fairy tales present basic conflicts to the child and allow the child to confront and work through the conflict in a uniquely personal way.

The purpose of the present investigation was to look more closely and systematically at which aspects of a fairy tale were most important to children in two different age groups. Accuracy of recall gives a limited view of the child's cognitive processing of the story. Other abilities which are developing during the elementary school years provide a more dynamic understanding of the child's performance on a story recall task (Piaget, 1959; Kohlberg, 1969; Selman, 1976). Here one might mention Piaget's work on language and thought or Kohlberg's and Selman's research on social cognitive understanding--works which grow out of developmental assumptions which are nonlinear and qualitative.

In our study 20 elementary school children, 10 second graders and 10 fifth graders, were interviewed. The children were all of normal intelligence although some had reading skills below grade level. The children in both grades were enrolled in a public school in Lincoln, Nebraska, which served a predominantly lower middle class population. These children all enjoy listening to stories and will sit quietly and attentively when a story if being read.

Teachers from both grades agreed to read the fairy tale, Beauty and the Beast (Provensen edition), to their children. The story was read to the entire class twice during the week prior to the taped interviews. The rationale behind the dual reading was to ensure that, as far as possible, each child selected would have some knowledge of the story. All children heard the same version of the story.

The taped sessions with each of the children were conducted the following week. Once the child had assured the experimenter that s/he could remember the story, the child was then asked, "Can you tell me what this story was about?" "What happens in this story?" "What are the things you remember?" Each child was allowed to narrate the story in as much or as little detail as desired. One fifth grader's reiteration of the story came out like this,

> Well, first, you have to understand that it was Christmas and the old man was going to town when he saw a patch of roses and picked one for his beautiful daughter, when, when, this, oh, this ugly monster appeared and said, "You will sacrifice you or your daughter to me for the rose and there will be a treasure chest of gold at your house if one of you come." And then, (short laugh) so the father went home and told his daughters he must leave them. But the Beauty said she would and she left. So, after she left she was there for a few months she asked the if she could go see her father for a week and Beast said "okay." And then, well, then after her father got healed she was going to leave but the sisters didn't want her to go and they kept her for another week.

For purposes of analyzing which parts of the tale were most compelling to the child, the story was subdivided into six sequential sections, listed below:

> Section 1: The introduction to the story: general background information and characteristics of Beauty's family and the circumstances in which they find themselves as the story opens.
>
> Section 2: This section encompassed the events surrounding the father's trip to reclaim his lost cargo; his attempt to purchase gifts for his children; his trip through the forest and arrival at the Beast's castle; and finally, the father's transgression of picking the rose in Beast's garden.
>
> Section 3: This third section dealt with the events following the "theft" of the rose; the first appearance of the Beast and Beast's ultimatum to the father that either he must die or one of his daughters must take his place.
>
> Section 4: The fourth section was marked by the following events: Beauty's father returning home to relate his adventure to his children; Beauty's decision to leave her home and take her father's place at the castle; and Beauty's life with the Beast once she does arrive.
>
> Section 5: The fifth section included Beauty returning home for a short visit; her sisters' attempts to keep her from returning to Beast; Beauty's dream in which she sees the Beast dying; and her return to the castle.
>
> Section 6: In this last section, we see the near death of Beast; his final proposal of marriage to Beauty and her acceptance of his proposal; the transformation of the Beast into a prince; and the conclusion of the tale.

Dividing the story into these subdivisions seemed to offer a viable way to look at, and record, the sequence that children moved through in retelling the story, as well as offering a method to determine which particular aspects of the tale were recalled by the children. Transcripts were scored on the basis of the child's reference to any of the events or characters listed in the various subdivisions. For example, if a child mentioned that Beauty had three brothers and three sisters and that the family was very poor, the child received a "point" for the first subdivision. If s/he then made reference to the father getting lost in the woods, s/he received another"point" for the second subdivision, and so on.

In reviewing the data, several observations can be made:

1. The second grade children, in general, did quite a remarkable job of retelling the story. Slightly over half the children made some reference to major events in all sections of the story. Children who failed to recall events in one section of the story also failed to recall events in other sections, as well. In a sense, these were the children who could not remember the story at all.

2. For the second grade children, the events listed in the conclusion of the story were most frequently recalled. Eighty percent of the children in the lower grade were aware that Beast was near death and that Beauty saved his life by agreeing to marry him.

3. The fifth grade responses present a somewhat different picture. Contrary to expectations, these students had a much more difficult time retelling the story in sequential order. They also had more difficulty in making reference to major events within the story. In addition, the number and degree of distortions was greater for these children than for the younger children.

4. The fifth grade children, in comparison to the second grade children, found the story's conclusion to be one of the least significant sections. By contrast, the appearance of the Beast and his ultimatum to Beauty's father

were the most significant events recalled. Eight percent of the older children recalled the facts pertaining to the father's encounter with the Beast. A comparison of the performance of the two groups of children is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Overall, the most reliable and some of the most interesting results in the present investigation are the age group differences. The second graders seem to be more adept at retelling a story in sequential order than their somewhat older counterparts and tend to find certain aspects of the story more compelling. That is, the younger children recall more readily the resolution to the tale while the older children focus on one of the essential conflicts presented in the story.

Looking at the data for both groups of children, interest picks up when the conflict is introduced into the story. This interpretation would lend some support to Bettelheim's thesis that fairy tales present conflicts to children which require some type of resolution.

A major question, however, is why the younger children exhibit such an interest in the resolution to the story and not the older children. One possible interpretation is that the story's resolution is couched within a framework that would be more appealing to a younger child. The Beast is transformed into a prince and the castle glows with firecrackers and music. Such elements of fantasy might well capture and hold the attention of a second grade child, but not necessarily that of an older child. In a sense, then, the author's resolution is not appropriate to the older, more mature, child. It is not as essential to his or her sense of meaning and continuity as it is to the younger child. Or, perhaps, it could be that, for the older child, other elements of the story

are more meaningful to the older child. For example, conflict allows the older child to actively construe the story's possible outcome; i.e., the fifth grader whose cognitive development begins to allow him to consider relative points of view and relative truths focuses on the points of choice within the story rather than on the fait accompli, which is of less interest to him.

Similarly, the fifth grader's inability to recall the events leading up to the father's theft of the rose might be interpreted in the light of the relevance of this particular section to the overall theme of the tale. What is essential to the child's thinking is the presentation of the conflict. One is tempted to speculate that the interest of the younger children is maintained throughout the story in order to determine, consciously or unconsciously, how the main characters resolve the conflict. The older children lose interest as they become increasingly capable of grappling with the issues on their own terms as opposed to the author's (cf.Kohlberg, 1969).

In looking at this data from a structuralist position, it might be helpful to view stories, or tales, as a structure composed of any number of elements, or canonical episodes, that exist as a whole. Each child's understanding of that story, as revealed by the sequence with which s/he retels the story, gives some indication of the child's perception of the structural integrity of that story.

Thus, for the second graders, whose retelling was fairly consistent across all sections, one interpretation is that this story exists as a complete structure. That is, each element of the story calls up the next element, and so on. And, while many of the younger children did focus on the conflict sequence, it might be fair to say that no one single element is significantly more important. All of the parts are important to this child because s/he is in the process of learning about stories. This method of recall finds some parallel in the iconic coding of Bruner, et al. (1966).

The data for the older children suggests, possibly, a higher degree of structural differentiation. For these children, understanding the logical organization of stories, according to a fixed form, is no longer an issue. Because of more extensive experience with stories, the elements have become differentiated so that certain sections can now function as new structures and symbols in their own right. As such, the child begins to focus his attention more directly on these autonomous structures. This interpretation aids in explaining the rather poor performance of the fifth graders on particular sections of the tale.

It would be erroneous to assume that the older children were comprehending less than the younger children. These children were attending to information that would facilitate the organization of new cognitive structures. The results for each age group of children, then, may give some indication of the child's grasp of the structure of stories.

This investigation was concerned primarily with identifying the events and characters most important to two different age groups. Further research might focus on how and when children distort events and characters. Replication of this study using other fairy tales would strengthen its findings. It might also be interesting to look at children's self-editing skills and the function of the numerous pauses they take in retelling their stories. Are these part of the story grammar for a particular child or does s/he call to mind other events but omit them in order to concentrate on "essential" elements of the story?

From our analysis of the story recall--that is, recall of a meaningful prose structure--one can conclude that accuracy of recall is not a linear function of age. The process and focus of social and cognitive development must be considered to make sense of the child's performance on what might be interpreted as simply a task in recall.

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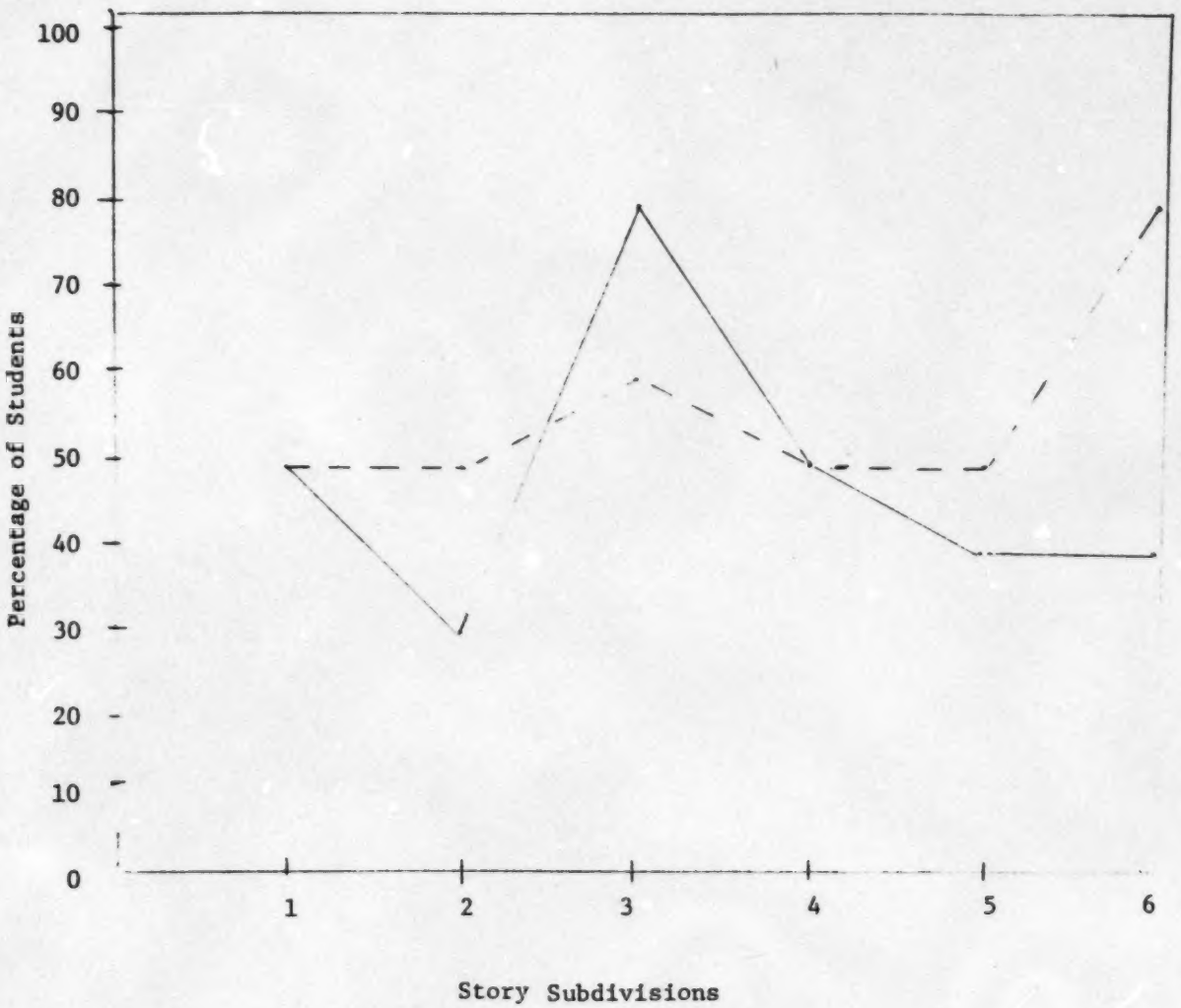
FIGURE 1

Comparison of Second and Fifth Grade Responses



Percentages of Accurate and Inaccurate Self-Appraisals

by Problem Class and Treatment Condition

Problem Class	Appraisal Index	Treatment Condition: Modeling-Attribution	Modeling-No Attribution	Didactic-Attribution	Didactic-No Attribution
Training	Accurate	92.4	78.5	70.1	63.9
	Overestimated	6.3	16.7	27.8	25.0
	Underestimated	1.3	4.8	2.1	11.1
Generalization	Accurate	85.4	62.5	58.3	50.0
	Overestimated	14.6	31.3	39.6	45.8
	Underestimated	0.0	6.2	2.1	4.2